

# The “Risk Fleet:” Excerpt from a Draft Memo from the Budget Department of the Imperial Naval Office (February 1900)

## Abstract

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The central premise of Alfred von Tirpitz’s “Risk Fleet” was that the German navy had to be large enough for an opposing force to fear engaging it. Here, the force at issue was the British Royal Navy. British resistance to German plans sped the arms race between the two countries in the opening decade of the twentieth century.

## Source

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[...]

It is impossible for us to strike England’s vulnerable point, which lies in its maritime trade. Apart from the cruisers themselves, cruiser warfare requires fortified bases that serve as operational points for the vessels. The lead that England has in terms of both bases and the number of ships overseas [...] is so great that Germany could never catch up.

England’s second point of weakness is that it lacks an army to protect the mainland in the event that the home fleet is defeated. We will be secure from an English attack if it is possible for us to build a battle fleet that is capable of taking on England’s home fleet—raising the specter of a loss of this fleet and of an unprotected mainland.

The figures in Appendix 1 demonstrate that this option is open to us. On the basis of the Naval Law, our battle fleet is one-third as strong as England’s. After the execution of the amendment, it will be two-thirds as strong.

To those who object that England will continue to build up its fleet, we must respond that the expansion of the English fleet cannot proceed at the same rate as ours, since the English fleet, due to its size, requires significantly more replacement vessels. Note 6 pertaining to column 24 in the Appendix shows that England must build 11.5 million tons of replacement vessels by 1920—*nearly three times the size of the entire German fleet under the Naval Law*—if it wants to have effective vessels in the year in question. We will compensate for the difference in tonnage existing between our fleet and the English navy in 1920 by especially thorough personnel training in addition to tactical training for large formations. The large number of vessels kept in service, which, under the Naval Law and the amendment, amount to two-thirds of the total tonnage of the battle fleet, will support these efforts. In the English navy, the figure is half of this.

The figures in column 24 and 36, which indicate the tonnage kept in service in both battle fleets, demonstrate Germany’s supremacy. Given the notorious difficulty the English face recruiting personnel, it is very unlikely this favorable ratio will change in the future.

From the above analysis it should be clear that there is one way for Germany to establish substantial naval power against England and to ensure the peace: the construction of a strong domestic battle fleet.

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Source: The “Risk Fleet:” Excerpt from a draft memo from the Budget Department of the Imperial Naval Office on “Securing Germany against an English Attack”. Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, RM 3/6657, AB 214–220; reprinted in Volker R. Berghahn and Wilhelm Deist, *Rüstung im Zeichen der wilhelminischen Weltpolitik: Grundlegende Dokumente 1890-1914*; Dusseldorf, 1988, pp. 128–29.

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